

'Blackberry Thumb' Latest In String Of Techno-Related Workplace Maladies; American Physical Therapy Association Offers Tips

For millions of Americans, hand-held electronic devices such as BlackBerries, Treos and Sidekicks are a source of convenience and efficiency. But, if used improperly, they also can be a source of chronic pain and injury, says the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

"'BlackBerry Thumb,' the latest in a string of techno-related, workplace maladies, is a catch-all phrase for repetitive stress injury, causing pain and/or numbness in the thumbs and joints of the hand," said Margot Miller, PT, a physical therapist with WorkWell Systems in Duluth, Minn., and president of APTA's Occupational Health Special Interest Group. Miller noted that the condition is caused by spending too much time checking and composing E-mails, instant messaging, and accessing the Internet for both work and personal use through a handheld wireless personal digital assistant (PDA).

Miller points out that users who abuse their PDAs -- that is, those who use them for more than short intervals, several times a day -- are more likely to develop symptoms ranging from swelling and hand throbbing to tendonitis. Additionally, because so many PDA users are middle-aged businesspeople, overuse can aggravate underlying arthritis, she said.

"Because the keyboard of a PDA is so small and because the thumb, which is the least dexterous part of the hand, is overtaxed (for faster typing), the risk of injury just skyrockets."

In regards to the best solution to prevent BlackBerry Thumb, Miller said: "Listen to your body, be aware of your symptoms and take personal responsibility."

Typical treatments include applying ice to the affected area, stretching, using a properly fitted thumb split, and possibly even a cortisone injection. In worse-case scenarios, some may need surgery to remove scar tissue that has thickened the tendons inside tunnels that sheath them. "But my first suggestion is that individuals who have these symptoms see a physical therapist," Miller concluded.

Tips on How To Avoid "BlackBerry Thumb" From the APTA:

- Take frequent breaks from your PDA. It's harmful to type for more than a few minutes at a time.
- Write fewer and shorter messages; learn to abbreviate your responses.
- Try to avoid thumb-typing; use your other fingers to type.
- If possible, place a support in your lap so wrists are in a more upright position and not flexed or bent.
- Do simple exercises, such as the following:
 - Tap each finger with the thumb of the same hand. Repeat 5 times.

- Alternate tapping the palm of your hand and the back of your hand against your thigh as quickly as you can. Repeat 20 times.
- Open up your hands and spread fingers as far apart as possible. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Fold your hands together; turn your palms away from your body as you extend your arms forward. You should only feel a gentle stretch. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Fold your hands together; turn your palms away from your body and extend your arms overhead. You should feel the stretch in your upper torso and shoulders to hand. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.

Source: <http://www.ohsonline.com>